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ABSTRACT

A text's meaning is, in part, independent of its form. Reading, most of the time, is taking meaning--not words--from the printed page, while proofreading requires attention to form rather than meaning. The author notes that: (1) a meaningful passage is easier to read than one with less meaning; (2) errors in oral reading usually do not obscure a passage's meaning; (3) a reader does not need to see the text to completely understand the passage; and (4) the larger the context, the greater the redundancy and the less the reader must depend upon the text to understand its meaning. Omitted words can be understood from context. Given these points, it is not surprising that many students have difficulty proofreading effectively. They check for ease of comprehension instead of focusing on form. By directing their attention to needed revisions and encouraging frequent rereading of papers, however, teachers can help students shift their attention from their intended meaning to the marks on the page. (MM)

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PROOFREADING IS NOT READING

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PROOFREADING IS NOT READING

Like many others in our profession, I suspect, I've always been both a fairly correct writer and a fairly good proofreader, so when I see a student in the Writing Lab dashing off error-filled pages and then looking out the window or picking up the campus newspaper, I see a need to intervene in that student's writing process.

"Are you finished writing?" I ask politely.

"Yes."

"Have you said all that you wanted to say?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Did you read your writing over for correctness?"

"I corrected it as I wrote it."

"Is there any place where you're not sure about correctness?"

At this point, many students ask about the use or placement of apostrophe with possessives, or about comma usage or the like. Then, after all these matters have been worked on to the writer's satisfaction, she reads the paper aloud and problems of clarity, if they exist, are discussed and worked out between writer and listener, who plays the part of the reader. A second or third reading concentrates on correctness and often reveals an astonishing number of errors still remaining--errors in the writing, but not in the oral reading performance of this student writer. David Bartholomae observed similar corrective reading behavior, reported in his well-known article "The Study of Error."

An important further step has been made by Gayle Irish, my colleague at The University of Akron. Irish has worked out a technique for teaching proofreading to her Basic Writing students that calls forth their own inner competence with language and causes them to attend to what is actually written on the page in order to find and correct manuscript errors. Irish does this by having the student read aloud while she notes the points at which the student reads correctly what is erroneously written, without observing the error. In successive readings, she directs the reader's attention, not to the error, but--and this is crucial--to the sentence in which the error appears. First, she might simply say, "Read that sentence again." Then, "Slow down and read it again." Then, "There is an error in that sentence. Can you find it?"

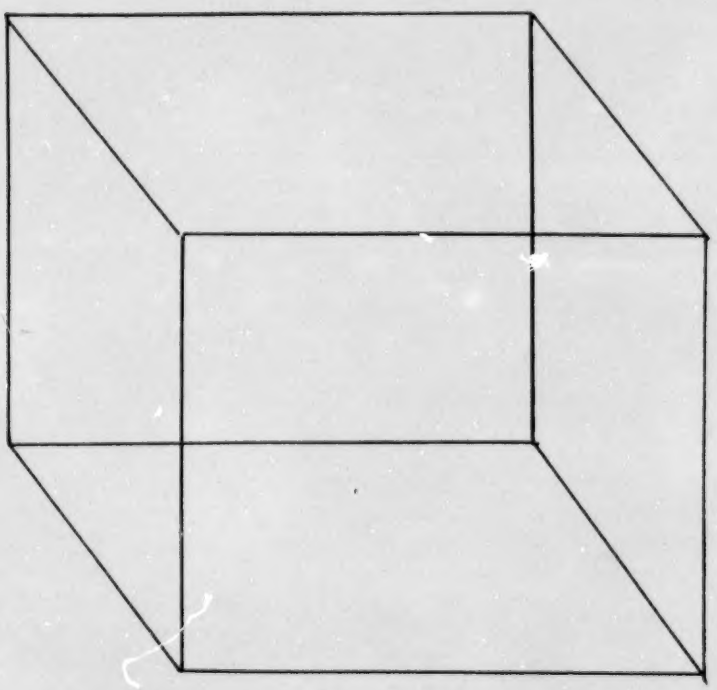
After proceeding in this way over the paper three, four, or even five times, Irish finds that most students can correct most errors. Wonderful!

But why does it take so long? Is it really necessary (and do I or other teachers have the patience) to have the writer read that paper--that sentence--five times before what is actually on the page is perceived?

Well, it is necessary to do whatever it takes to help our student writers attend to their own writing, and knowing more about reading can show us just how formidable are the barriers that we hope to coach our students over when we ask them to produce correct text.

The fact is that for most of us, most of the time, reading is taking meaning from the printed page--not words. Proofreading is a quite different and far more visual activity. Proofreading is not reading, strictly speaking, because a proofreader attends to form rather than to meaning. In fact, according to Frank Smith, "It is not possible to identify a configuration both as a word and as a sequence of letters at the same time." (p.127).

He uses several familiar patterns to illustrate that it is an actual neurological impossibility for us to use the same visual information for two purposes simultaneously. I think the "glass box" is simple and clear enough to suffice.



If at first glance we perceive the lower end of the box as being closer and the upper end as more distant, we can voluntarily reverse that perception, and we can shift back and forth as many times as we wish. What we cannot do, though, is see the box both ways at once, no matter how hard we concentrate or how much we will to do so.

Likewise, says Smith, in looking at a piece of writing, we cannot see both letters and words, both form and meaning, at the same instant. Therefore, proofreading is not and cannot be what we call "reading." And in fact there is some mystery about the extent to which reading is visual at all.

Four points seem relevant to the development of this idea:

1. A meaningful passage is easier to read than one with less "meaning."
2. A reader's oral performance errors usually preserve meaning even though the words of a passage are changed.
3. The reader does not need to see the text completely to understand the passage.
4. The larger the context, the greater the redundancy and the less the reader must depend upon the text to understand its meaning.

Let's return to that first point for a moment, that a meaningful passage is easier to read than one with less "meaning." I got interested in the concept when trying to read aloud one of those high-interest/low-skill books that my son brought home from his seventh grade high intensity reading course. I had a hard time reading it. Then later when I came across the following three passages, I did an informal poll, asking fifty people to place the passages in order from easiest to hardest to read.

> I have a friend. His name is Jimmy. Yesterday he got a new bike. It's red. Somebody stole it already.
>
> Somebody stole the new red bike my friend Jimmy just got yesterday.
>
> The new red bike my friend Jimmy got yesterday has already been stolen.

I made no attempt to be scientific; the population was made up of people I had easiest access to: family members and friends, colleagues, and students, including peer tutors in the Writing Lab. The youngest respondent was a 13-year-old seventh grader; the oldest, a 59-year-old freshman. Eighty percent were in the 13 - 23 age range. Several were Ph.D.'s.

For six of these people, the short kernel sentences were easiest to read; thirty-six found them the most difficult. Thirty-three found the passive construction easiest; only three

found it most difficult. The middle was occupied mainly by the sentence beginning "Somebody already stole...," and equal numbers found it easiest and hardest to read.

If we look at those passages again, we see that relationships among the ideas in those short kernels must be provided by the reader. That work, of providing the meaning of the passage, is what most respondents named as the reason they found the passage most difficult. Those who found it easiest explained that they simply "like short sentences--they're easier to read," indicating perhaps that these readers did not look beyond the sentence for the meaning of the passage as a whole. This passage resembles the material provided in the seventh grade high intensity reading course.

I was surprised that thirty-three of the respondents, including half the Basic Writing students in the sample, found the passive construction easiest, since as an English teacher I often see the direction Avoid the passive in handbooks. When questioned, some of them observed that introducing somebody into the other two passages created uncertainty since it is in fact irrelevant who stole the bike. For these readers, the "empty" word interfered with understanding because it doesn't contribute to the meaning. Those who preferred the structure, Somebody already stole... generally found it familiar and somewhat colloquial--an affective response that certainly must be considered when we think about readability.

Goodman points out a related phenomenon in a discussion of miscue analysis. Miscue is Goodman's term for performance errors--deviations from a written text made by a person reading orally.

Remember point 2: Readers' performance errors usually preserve the meaning of the passage. Goodman was listening to a first grader reading aloud about Jimmy and Sue from a pair of what students call "reading books." She found the "easier" of the two books more difficult, "to the point of total confusion," and "the more advanced story, with its stronger syntax, more fully formed language, and increased load of meaning," more readable, according to his analysis of her miscues. On the fourth appearance of the name Sue, and from then on, this young reader called the character Suzie, "as Sue becomes better known," Goodman observes. And we all are likely to substitute words in a similar way when reading aloud, while still conveying the meaning of the text. Goodman regards this practice as a sign of understanding, in fact.

Here is an example: When reading, "He shook the piggy bank and out came some money," one might substitute dimes or quarters for the word money, but not many, which looks and sounds like money but would be absurd in terms of the grammar and the meaning of the sentence.

Again, bilingual readers may make "errors" in reading a mixed text, by translating some words. For example, Un homme and his frère walked towards la porte may become Un homme et son frère walked towards the door. Meaning has not changed, but words sure have. Furthermore, the reader rarely remembers which words were in which language, once an understanding of the passage has been gained.

We can go now to point 3: The reader does not need to see the letters or the words completely to understand the passage. As experienced readers of texts in many stages of mutilation and decay, you hardly need a demonstration, but Frank Smith used the following example and so will I.

Can you complete this sentence? "The captain ordered the mate to drop the an-" end of page. Almost certainly, the word is anchor, and we can "read" the last word even though most of it isn't there, because we already understand a context for the sentence. (The end of the sentence could be angry cat, but if it were, we would know that too from earlier sentences.) In fact, the larger the context, the less the reader must depend upon visually perceiving the text in order to understand its meaning, and that, you'll remember, is point 4. By way of illustration, let's assume as context a professional conference, with me up front talking and you sitting and listening.

Imagine that as you sit, you become a bit sleepy and your mind wanders to brighter scenes. You jot a note to your neighbor, which because of a wet coffee splotch on your note pad appears as After this session, let's meet in the lobby. Nodding agreement, your neighbor responds, across a creased section of program page, Interesting information--too bad the presenter is so dull.

Because both of you understand the physical and shall I say spiritual condition you find yourselves in, your communication can be context-bound, like speech, and still be understood.

Meaning has only to be hinted at, since it already exists in your minds. You don't actually need to see all the words.

And much less does a student "see" all the words when rereading a paper that she has just written. In the first place, she doesn't need to, so why should she? And in the second place, she may not be able to, for she is quite correctly conceiving of her written page as a communication, so she reads its meaning--not its form, looking not at but beyond the text.

Now, she can, with practice, develop the perceptual skill of shifting her focus from her intended meaning to the marks she has made on the page. Remember the glass box. This student writer is in the situation of a person who can see the box facing in one direction but cannot see it facing the other way. She is at the point in Goodman's model where the reader, having looked at the text, "forms a perceptual image," which is "partly what he sees and partly what he expected to see." By practicing, by having her attention directed, by reading her writing, and reading her writing, and reading her writing again, this writer can learn to attend to what is on the page, can learn to perceive the graphic marks on the paper, can learn the non-reading behavior that we call proofreading.

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